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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 000158

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR NEA - DAS PATTON, NEA/PI, NEA/MAG AND NEA/PPD

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [EAID](#) [KMPI](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: MOROCCO PRESS FREEDOM: DAS PATTON'S VISIT

REF: 07 RABAT 1465

1. (SBU) Summary: During his January 16-19 visit to Morocco, DAS Kent Patton discussed Morocco's media environment and press freedom with local stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds. Embassy officials stressed that passage of a revised press code eliminating prison sentences remained a key USG reform objective. While Moroccan press is widely considered to be among the freest in the Arab world, serious deficiencies remain. The Government of Morocco (GOM) currently lacks the political will to fully liberalize the country's press code but seldom strictly enforces it, leaving a void of uncertainty for journalists to negotiate. While this void can be arbitrarily exploited to harass and punish journalists, many prefer to operate within this vague arrangement rather than sign off on a less-than-ideal revision that, if strictly enforced, could in practice reduce press freedoms. Many traditional partisans of press freedoms, having ascended to positions of power, find themselves targets of the increasingly aggressive independent press and thus are reluctant to push for even greater liberalization. Moreover, the Moroccan press union is weak, unrepresentative and highly politicized, leaving Mission Morocco with no effective and obvious local ally with whom to partner in our efforts to promote legislative reform. As a result, the Mission is focusing on promotion of journalistic professionalism and ethics by designing and implementing a variety of training programs in an effort to boost mutual confidence and trust between the political class and the press and help develop the political will necessary to move forward with legislative reform. End Summary.

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STATE OF PLAY  
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2. (SBU) Post's Information Officer David Ranz briefed DAS Patton on developments in the Moroccan media and USG efforts to promote freedom of the press and journalistic professionalism. He stated that Morocco's vibrant, independent press enjoyed a wide degree of freedom; even the traditional red-lines -- the monarchy, Islam and "territorial integrity" (read: Western Sahara) -- were frequently breached without consequences. Although the occasional criminal and civil cases against journalists clearly encouraged self-censorship, there was no evidence that they were impeding bold, independent journalists such as Tel Quel director Ahmed Benchemsi from continuing to push the envelope of freedom of expression. The fact that the most recent prosecution against Benchemsi under the press code has been

repeatedly postponed indicates a reluctance on the part of the Moroccan Government to pursue such cases, he stated.

13. (SBU) Passage of a revised press code eliminating all prison sentences remains a key USG reform objective, but Ranz expressed skepticism that Minister of Communications Naciri would be able to bridge the remaining differences between conservative elements in the GOM on the one hand, and the media community on the other, over a draft bill that had been held over from the previous government. He added that there was a broad lack of political will among Moroccan leaders to push for a revised press code, even among traditional supporters of press freedom among leftist political parties who increasingly found themselves the targets of the new independent press. Responding to Patton's questions about potential mechanisms for fostering public demand for greater press freedom, Ranz noted that the Moroccan press union was deeply politicized and feckless, and was widely considered to be unrepresentative of the journalist community (of which perhaps 10-15 percent are members). Moreover, it was maintaining a boycott against cooperation with the USG as a result of U.S. policy in the Middle East, making any partnership difficult to imagine for the foreseeable future. Patton urged post to continue exploring creative means to increase and focus demands for press freedom.

14. (SBU) Patton also met with media mogul Abdelmounaim Dilami, whose titles include Chairman of the Moroccan Federation of Publishers (FMEJ), Director of Eco Medias Group (the largest private media conglomerate in Morocco), and IREX MENA Media Advisory Board member for Morocco. Dilami said the media environment had improved significantly since the early 1990s, especially during the reign of King Mohammed VI.

RABAT 00000158 002 OF 003

Regarding the press code, Dilami said the aforementioned draft bill was better than the existing law, but went insufficiently far from the perspective of the press community. He added that the new GOM had been largely silent on the issue and he was not optimistic that it would take action any time soon. He preferred the status quo to a poorly conceived revision, saying that severe penalties that are loosely and rarely enforced were preferable to more moderate sentences that judges would feel compelled to impose. He admitted that while the FMEJ and the National Union of Moroccan Press (SNPM) would have little ability to fight more punitive press laws directly, they could exert pressure via the articles they publish.

15. (SBU) Later, Patton discussed press issues with Sanaa al-Aji, the Moroccan journalist who received a one-year suspended prison sentence and a fine for her article on jokes in Morocco (including about Islam, sex and politics) in the Arabic-language weekly publication Nichane. Al-Aji believed that while Morocco had reduced barriers to press freedom, the situation remained flawed. On the one hand, journalists could speak freely and criticize religion with some limits, but they could still be put on trial for publishing controversial material, and unfortunately it was not clear who decided what was offensive. Like Dilami, she felt that accepting the status quo might be the best course for now because "at least the King is open and modern."

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ALTERNATIVES  
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16. (SBU) Given the lack of political will on the part of the GOM and the difficulty of finding enthusiastic and effective partners among the organizations that represent journalists to push for a revised press code, the Mission has focused on training programs to promote ethical and professional practices of journalists in Morocco. Persistent problems with basic journalistic ethics in Morocco, coupled with arbitrarily enforced and punitive press laws, have discouraged politicians from supporting additional press

freedom. Dilami commented that politicians view their positions as a path to power rather than a way to liberalize, and they consider private media as trespassers on their domain. Until those politicians who hold this opinion are forced to change their view, meaningful reform will be hard to achieve. By providing training on ethical standards and professional practices, the Embassy hopes to contribute to the building of confidence between the media and the political class.

¶7. (SBU) Dilami mentioned a proposal to create a National Press Council as part of the revised press code, which would include three independent representatives of human rights and public interest groups, as an indication of efforts to institute independent, self-governance of the press and remove this responsibility from the hands of the government. Al-Aji agreed on the need for an official media-monitoring body but questioned who would run it and how. Dilami noted that the GOM now provided USD 6.4 million annually to subsidize print media, allowing it to modernize and become more professional. Still, he complained that so much emphasis is placed on the political aspect of the media that it is not appreciated as a means of communication.

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CURRENT PROGRAMS  
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¶8. (SBU) Regarding IREX, Dilami, an IREX MENA Media Advisory Board member for Morocco himself, commented that he did not understand the purpose of the program and had the impression that those who managed it were professional project designers who simply run the same project in multiple countries rather than creating new and country specific proposals. He said to be constructive, IREX needed to find an appropriate entry point for its efforts, but he did not feel that it had. He cited an IREX project in Jordan that trained lawyers in the field of press freedom as an example of being pointless, because even training journalists will not change the media environment if publishers are not willing to accept changes. Separately, Ranz also encouraged MEPI to provide IREX's MENA Media project with the latitude to fund training designed

RABAT 00000158 003 OF 003

specifically for the needs of Moroccan journalists, particularly the new crop of independent radio stations. IREX has the potential to be very helpful in promoting reform in Morocco, but the country's unique position in the field of Arab media requires adaptation to the needs of the local market. Dilami voiced concern about Advisory Board members offering project proposals to IREX, something which he felt should not be allowed.

¶9. (U) As an example, Ranz cited a recent pilot project funded by the Public Affairs Section, which trained the press corps in Oujda, capital of the Oriental region, in the use of new media and citizen journalism techniques, such as podcasting, blogging, and posting videos on YouTube and dailymotion.com. Ranz noted that the regional press -- both print and on-line -- played a vital role in fostering grass-roots democratization by conducting critical oversight of local governance, as evidenced by the now-famous "Sniper of Targuist" case, in which someone posted videos of Moroccan policemen taking bribes on YouTube, compelling local authorities to take action against the offending parties. Ranz stated that the Moroccan consultant who conducted the successful pilot training -- a well-known local blogger himself -- was submitting a proposal for a MEPI local grant to conduct similar training sessions in regional cities throughout Morocco; Patton expressed support for funding this proposal.

¶10. (U) DAS Patton has cleared this cable.

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